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Imaging the seasons: objects and the almanac form

Abstract

Referring to my almanac projects, this essay speculates on how we may image the seasons through the use of objects and the almanac form. I argue that the ambiguities and uncertainties objects hold within images open up an area for speculations; an arena that illuminates 'profane existence' of everyday experience as an 'enigmatic form of something [that is] beyond [their] existence.' I begin by exploring the almanac form as a tool for mapping experiences in the context of science and art with a specific focus on the ancient Chinese almanac. I use Walter Benjamin's Denkbild (thought-image) as a framework to analyse the almanac projects, revealing the roles of objects within images. In doing so, I seek to realise images' potential to illuminate subjective everyday experiences.

Keywords

seasons, imaging, almanac, form, objects

Disciplines

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Imaging the Seasons: Objects and the Almanac Form

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An almanac is an ancient tool, a scientific instrument for mapping experiences of the physical environments and organising them into familiar and predictable patterns, making sense of past, present, and future. It provides a grounded engagement with the material world and objects through a structure based on observations. One of the earliest almanacs known in Europe was written by Roger Bacon in 1267, where tables showing the movement of astronomical bodies and constellations were used for a whole host of human activities. The Chinese Almanac similarly uses the observed movement of the heavenly bodies for the purpose of time-reckoning. [2] Embedded in the imperial calendar (皇曆), an important official publication, the Chinese lunisolar calendar or agricultural calendar (農曆) advises suitable activities for the emperor and all his subjects. [3] For 'the son of heaven' (天子) it provided a divination reference to all things between heaven and earth. For his agrarian subjects it was an essential 'to-do' list for planting, harvesting, and other related tasks. Still in use today, the Chinese Almanac divides each solar year (歲) into twenty-four solar terms (節氣) as determined by the sun's positions on the ecliptic (figure 2). [4] Each solar term lasts fifteen days and marks a significant point in the season, imminent weather occurrences, or significant agricultural events as observed in ancient China. Their notations connect astronomic and atmospheric conditions, such as rain water (雨水), summer solstice (夏至), limit of heat (處暑), or major snow (大雪), directly to agricultural activities, animal behaviours, and plant growth cycles. Each solar term is subdivided into three pentads (候 or five-day periods), totalling seventy-two (figure 1). [5] These subdivisions make further note of occurrences such as, when 'wild geese arrive' (鴻雁來), 'chrysanthemums tinge yellow' (菊有黃華), or 'earthworms form knots' (蚯蚓結). The almanac pays close attention to

the world of matter: soil properties, topographies, daylight hours, weather conditions, insect reproduction cycles, migratory bird patterns, enabling the effective implementation of agricultural activities. Experiences of cyclical time are thus marked by the direct and active interaction with material constituents in this almanac form.

Ecologist and writer, Aldo Leopold also enacted this direct engagement with the material world in an almanac form. In *A Sand County Almanac*, he provides readers with intimate accounts of activities observed in the plant and animal worlds and their responses to the changing seasons in Wisconsin. [6] In Leopold's almanac, humans are a bit player in this broader world of wilderness. In developing his concept of land ethics, he equalises the status of humans with all things:

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member or citizen of it. [7]

More recently, philosopher Levi Bryant further extends this concept of wilderness ontologically to 'rescue this kernel from the domain of anthropocentric experience and transform it[...] wilderness would signify being as a plurality of agencies, without ontological hierarchy—one that might refuse any bifurcation of being into nature and culture'. [8] Bryant's aim echoes that of Leopold, he continues:

we need to cultivate modes of thinking that help us to become attentive to the alterity of things, the thingliness of things, and the differences that things themselves contribute independent of social construction, human intention, and human meanings. [9]

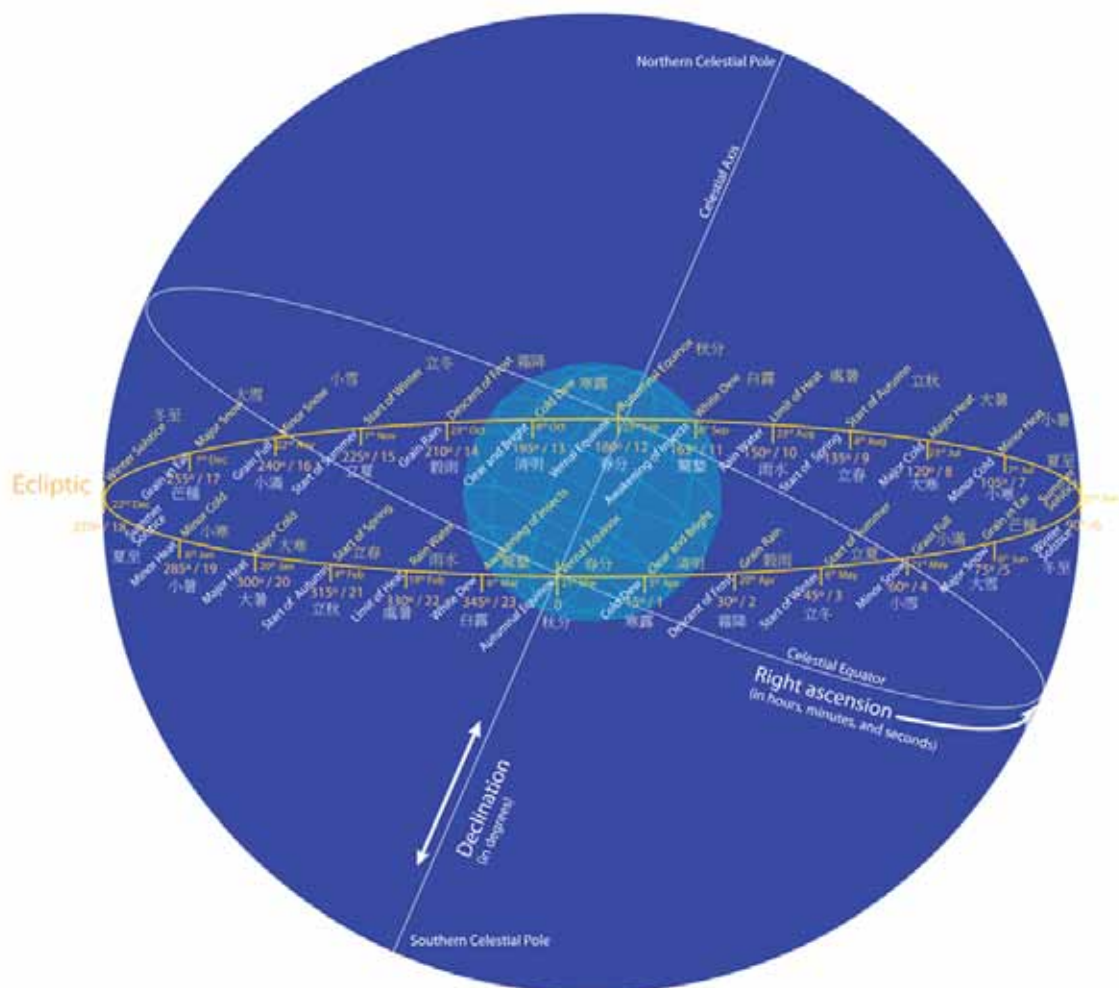


Figure 2. Illustration from *The Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond*

My almanac projects draw attention to the 'plurality of agencies' in each encounter in the material world by paying close attention to everyday objects in their changing surrounds. To date these projects consist of three works: the *Autumn Almanac of Tokyo* (2008), the *Seasonal Almanac of Austinmer* (2009) and the *Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond* (2011–2012). [10] The earliest work was created during my Australia Council Tokyo studio residency that took place between 5 September and 4 December 2008. All projects adopt the Chinese Almanac as a structuring device to affiliate each day with reference to seasonal occurrences. Both the *Autumn Almanac* and

the *Seasonal Almanac* consist of daily online postcards for the durations of the projects while one entry of the *Illustrated Almanac* corresponds to one pentad and seventy-two were posted over one calendar year (from Spring 2011 to Spring 2012). [11] Each post in these almanacs is composed of an image, created using selected materials gathered on the day or pentad: photographs, ephemerals, audio recordings, or video footage, and a textual exposition that drew upon things, objects, characters, experiences, questions, and thoughts encountered in the period of time. The *Autumn Almanac* was conceived as a tool to make sense of the encounter with Tokyo beyond the stereotypical imaginings of the

city. The combined use of visual (sometimes audio and moving) images and texts renders actual experiences tangible and explores the gaps that arise between the generalised perception of seasons and their materialistic manifestations in contemporary Japan, where a modern and modified form of the Chinese Almanac still exists. Rather than illustrating theoretic concepts, the almanac projects meditate on the materiality of our experiences. In contrast to weather data-driven artworks, such as Tim Knowles' *Wind-walk* (2008) and Cam and Yvette Merton's *The Little Optimum* (2003), that feed real-time weather data into the works in ways that affect the artist's or audience's immediate experience, the almanac projects' encounter with materiality is less direct. Rather, the projects make manifest experience as an aesthetic act of perception through encountering the world through things.

By adopting the Chinese Almanac as a structure for discursive entries, the almanac

projects pay attention to the 'plurality of agencies' in everyday encounters and their *zuihitsu* (随筆, literally meaning 'following the brush') approach provides opportunities to bring out narratives immanent within these experiences. [12] In this context, *zuihitsu* as a form of writing focuses on the interaction with seasons and surrounds through observation of objects in time, place, and transition. This practice is exemplified by Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book* and women's diaristic tradition of tenth-century Japan. Shōnagon's work is believed to have been conceived as lists of seasonally and aesthetically appropriate objects to be used in poetic compositions. By layering the Chinese Almanac with the modern Japanese *sekki* (節気) the ninety entries of Autumn Almanac extend ancient categories of things to include objects like daikon, freezing rain, typhoons, kotatsu (a type of heater), water pipes, utagoe kissa (singing cafes – cafes where the customers take turns performing on a stage), trains, omurisu (rice omelette),



Figure 3. The Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond, Minor Heat: Hot Winds Arrive

postcards, laundry, haircuts, junk stores, art, architecture, and so on. Like Shōnagon's lists of poetic objects that situate her readers in specific places and times, things in the Autumn Almanac anchor the experience of contemporary Tokyo firmly to the tangible materials of everyday life through the use of the image.

Here, I turn to Walter Benjamin's development of *Denkbild* (thought-image) as a framework for further analysing the role of objects depicted in my online almanacs. In what follows, I shall digress briefly to explore the *Denkbild* form through Benjamin's writings. In *One Way Street*, Benjamin grasped the elusive experience of the modern metropolis through the *Denkbild* where image plays a central but covert part. [14] Karoline Kirst writes, 'Instead of clarifying a thought by means of an image in linear fashion, or vice versa, the *Denkbild* presents an image as an integral albeit not immediately recognizable part of the thought'.

Benjamin's literary *Denkbild* alters the Baroque emblem's tripartite structure by transforming the visual *pictura* into a textual image. Paul Stephens and Robert Hardwick Weston explain:

The inscriptio is generally preserved in the form of the italicized title, while the pictura, corresponding to the Denkbild's anchor in subjective experience, is collapsed into the subscriptio, making the visual imago a component of the exegetical text that traditionally explained it. On the level of content and style, the collapsing of pictura into subscriptio aims to forge a mental image through persuasive vividness, or anazographesis. [15]

Anazographesis, a practice of evoking emotional impulse through imaging (perceived or imagined), is apposite for framing the complex relationship between word and image within Benjamin's philosophy. [16] Caygill argues that this relationship is defined by Benjamin's concept of experience. Caygill writes:



Figure 4. The Seasonal Almanac of Ausitnmer, Start of autumn: cold cicada chirps

Benjamin's philosophy of the image is best understood through an examination of its place within the speculative philosophy of experience. Just as the critique of the word was transformed by the speculative concept of experience, so too was the critique of the image. The analysis of the image within a philosophy of speculative experience had considerable implications for the critique of the experience of images in the guise of art criticism and of art history. Benjamin argued that images should be understood as a technology for organising experience, and that visual art was a way of speculating upon the limits of experience from within. However, the technological organisation of experience through the image did not necessarily agree with the political organisation of experience through the word. [17]

In relation to the technological organisation of experience, Esther Leslie writes in reference to Benjamin's 'Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility' that, 'The

photographic object brings objects closer for inspection, providing an imprint of traces of the world. It reveals traces (*Spuren*), not of the potter's handprint, but of the objective modern world'. [18] This imprint is not a reflection but a trace, a texture, a material presence of the world that remains in the artwork. This translation of tactility into photographic form is important in thinking about how images function within the almanac projects. In what follows, I analyse three entries using the *Denkbild* form as a framework.

In a brief entry in the *Seasonal Almanac*, the *inscriptio* reads: 'Start of Autumn: cold cicadas chirp', 'February 15th, 2009'. The *pictura* shows a pair of dampened shoes in the bottom left-hand corner standing on an assortment of black pebbles; on the speckled ground are rocks, shell fragments, remnants of blue bottles (jellyfish), strands of seaweed, flotsam and jetsam; the shoes point towards the centre of the image where a



Figure 5. The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo, Shuubun: Beetles wall up their burrows/ Adzuki beans ripen

dead fish lies (figure 4). The *subscriptio* speaks of the experience of walking on the beach, the observation of rain, previous high tide, washed-up strap weeds and blue bottles. The diaristic form of an almanac is conducive to transference of actual experience into speculative thoughts for both writers and readers. These thoughts remain *unsaid* and subjective. They may suggest memories or imaginings of an Australian seaside, the weather of New South Wales' South Coast in February, or ocean temperatures that encourage the dominance of jellyfish species. Furthermore, the materiality of objects as depicted within the visual image recall unsaid sensations: the crunchiness of pebbles, the discomfort of wearing wet shoes, the texture of dead fish, the 'popping' of blue bottles' swim bladders underfoot. Instead of the 'collapsing of *pictura* into *subscriptio*', the *pictura* returns to a visual form and stands apart from the textual *inscriptio* and *subscription*. [19] On this open yet concrete platform, the *pictura* brings out

the alterity of things visually through anazographesis.

In a post from the *Autumn Almanac*, the *inscriptio* reads: 'Shuubun: Beetles wall up their burrows/Adzuki beans ripen, October 1st, 2008'. [20] The *pictura* shows a large body of fast-flowing water; it is night, the water is dark and reflects surrounding coloured lights (figure 5). The *subscriptio* presents a simple scenario in suburban Tokyo as tropical cyclones dissipated, and an unexpected encounter with an urban animal species—*tanuki* (*Nyctereutes procyonoides viverrinus*). [21] Many thoughts emerge from this assemblage that are *unsaid*. Non-human animals lose their habitats to the encroaching suburban development and seek refuge in the human-made environment. During the Autumnal Equinox in October, cyclones still pass through Japan, bringing with them heavy rainfall. Densely built areas need carefully planned drainage to channel storm water quickly and effectively.



Figure 6. The Autumn Almanac of Tokyo, Shousetsu: Heaven's essence rises, earth's essence sinks/ north wind, freezing rain

The *Kandagawa* provides the main waterway to take the rainwater out to Tokyo Bay. The tripartite fragment teases out the interconnectedness of the weather system, geography, and urban environments through physical things: Cyclones 0815 and 0817, neighbouring China, the *Kandagawa*, the neighbourhoods of *Takadanobaba* and *Shima-Ochiai*, rainfall, drains, busy roads, railway, and *tanuki*. The gushing water in the visual *pictura* occupies a central node in this enmeshed network of things. Its pictorial qualities: blackness, glassy surface, patterns of undulations, silence, enhance the materiality of things and suggest their agency without naming it. Within the image, to quote from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, 'objects appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics'. [22] The *pictura* provides an *other* path for thinking about temporal contexts framed by the *inscriptio* and the subject's experiences described in the *subscriptio*.

In one of the last entries in the *Autumn Almanac* under the *inscriptio* of 'Shousetsu: Heaven's essence rises, earth's essence sinks/ North wind, freezing rain' dated 'December 1st, 2008', the *pictura* presents an impressive pile of junk that fills the entire frame, lit by a strangely warm yellow-green glow. [23] The *subscriptio* describes a pleasant expedition to visit a new acquaintance in the *Akikawa* valley of Tokyo's far west. The written text describes what one may imagine to be typical of modern Japanese architecture and design: clever house renovation, stylish Japanese-Italian restaurant by the river, new *onsen* facilities, sharply contrasting the disorderly orderliness of the pile in the image. In the last paragraph, the reader discovers that the astounding pile is, in fact, the goods of a second-hand store run by a Korean migrant. The photographic image captures each and every object in sharp focus: in the bottom left-hand corner the bronze-colour folding chair casually leans on the pile, congregating nearby like stacks of kindling are neatly folded clear plastic umbrellas with curved white handles, a round

white tub wrapped in plastic sits prominently at the bottom centre of the frame, to its right is an orange enamel cook pot, above is a pale blue rectangular waste paper basket, to its left are an old-fashioned cypress and copper water bucket and its smaller counterpart for rice; the right of the image is populated by video tape decks, disc players, fax machines, and drawers of different types, the flat rectangular shapes cascade into a deep valley where a flattened white sports shoe with missing laces sits at its base. In the image, the objects emanate an innocence; in retaining their pristine appearances, their functions are clearly discernible. These photographed objects are no longer desirable commodities nor are they refuse; they sit somewhere in between, perhaps as desirable refuse. This clarity of the image captures the materiality of the junk pile.

The visual image in the almanac entries extends the contemplative process and draws out *what is unsaid* in the textual image. Specifically, the *pictura* transposes the materiality of objects into visual form, bringing out 'profane existence' of everyday experience.[24] Stephen and Weston write:

This element of everyday experience is central both to the Denkbild form and to denkb(u)ilding as discursive practice. As a mode of writing, to denkbild is to build up thought, to construct [bilden] thought, criticism, from the images of everyday life. [25]

Pictura in these almanac entries bring out the 'alterity of things' through observations, estrangement, and ambiguities. These ambiguities and uncertainties within the image make room for speculations, allow the 'thinginess of things' to proliferate as individual narratives. Unlike Benjamin's literary *Denkbild*, where the *pictura* is collapsed into the *subscriptio*, the generation of emotions and affects through *what is not said* in the almanac projects puts an emphasis back on the image. These narratives may illuminate the 'profane existence' of everyday experience and allude to an 'enigmatic form of something [that is] beyond [their] existence'. Objects within these images in the almanac

projects revealed everyday experiences in a new light. As Bryant argues:

art seems to carry the capacity to break with meaning, to bring the alterity and thingliness of things to the fore, to allow us to see them both from their point of view and independent of our own meanings and intentions'. [26]

In conclusion, the almanac projects as art-works generate structures that interpret experience through encounters with objects. Aspects of these encounters are captured visually and textually. This framing de-familiarises the objects and 'allows an encounter [with...] the familiar things of our everyday

life in their independent thinginess' by bringing them closer for inspection and 'seeing them, perhaps for the very first time'. [27] By analysing the almanacs' entries using Benjamin's Denkbild as a framework, I reveal the role of objects within images in these works. In doing so, I hope to realise images' potential to illuminate subjective everyday experiences.

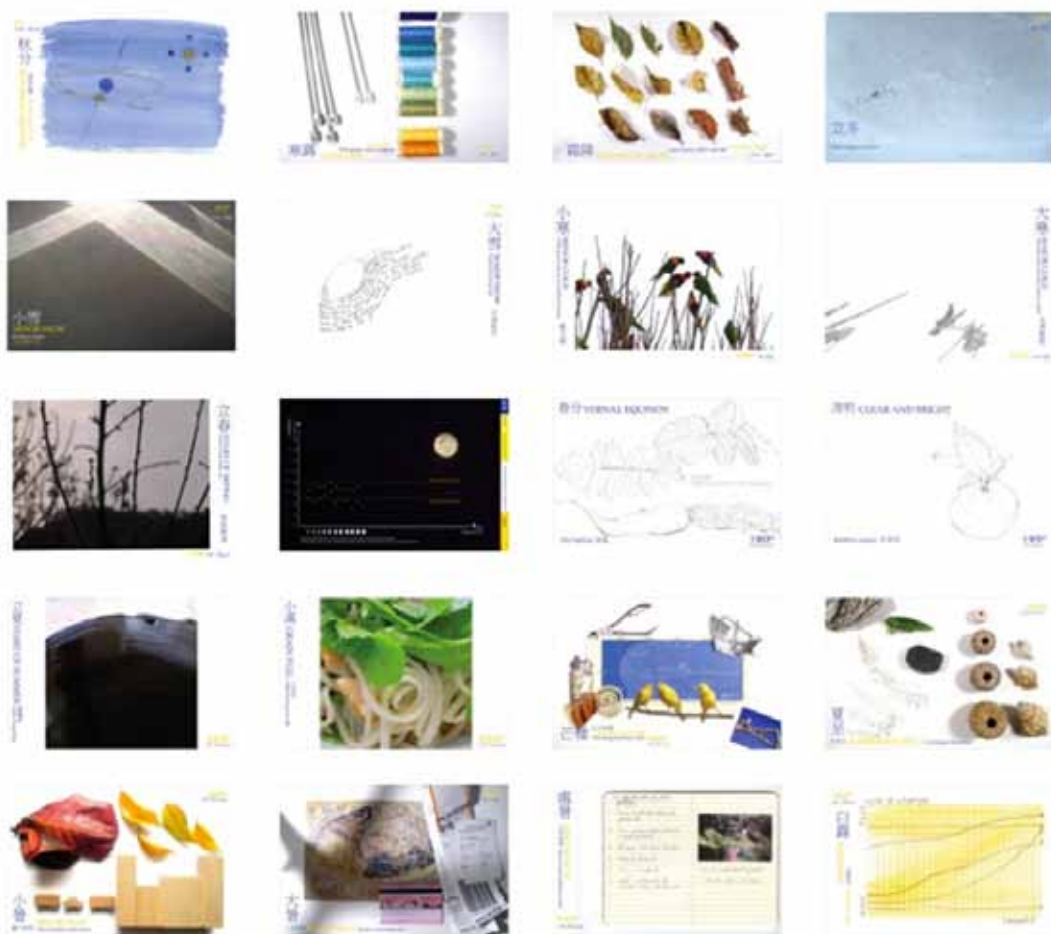


Figure 7. Collage of entries from The Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond

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1. Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History', in *The Philosophical Forum*, XV, 1-2 (fall/winter 1983-1984), 80.
2. Time-reckoning in ancient and imperial China was of great import socially and politically. The Chinese lunisolar calendar combines calendric calculations for a lunar year (年 nián) with a solar year (歲). Whereas the lunar calendar incorporates complex calculations based on the movement of the moon (determining both the durations and the number of months each year), the solar calendar is based on the apparent position of the sun and remains unchanged each year.
3. I make a distinction between huánglì (皇曆) imperial calendar and huánglì (黃曆) 'yellow calendar'. The Yellow Calendar was said to have been written by or in the times of the mythical Yellow Emperor and there is evidence that dates it to around 4000 BC. The Yellow Calendar is one of a number of calendars devised in ancient China. In comparison, the imperial calendar is a newer form of official time-reckoning issued by the centralised imperial government through

different dynasties in imperial China. The very similar pronunciation of the two terms has blurred their distinct histories and both seem to be attributed as the predecessor of the now common 通勝 tōngshèng (in Mandarin) or tung sing (in Cantonese).

4. As opposed to suì (solar year), which is defined as the period between two consecutive vernal equinoxes, a lunar year is (年 nián), defined as the period between two consecutive lunar new year days. The solar-based calculations reckon seasons astronomically; that is, seasons are defined by apparent positions of the sun on the ecliptic rather than meteorologically by average air temperatures.
5. This calendar was adopted in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, where the solar terms remain unchanged but the pentads were modified in accordance with local observations and conditions.
6. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, New York: Ballantine, 1966.
7. Leopold, 239 – 40.
8. Levi Bryant, 'Wilderness Ontology' in *Preternatural*. Ed. Celina Jeffery, New York: Punctum, 2011, p. 21.
9. Bryant, 23.
10. The project title of the Autumn Almanac of Tokyo in Japanese is 東京の秋の生活暦 (www.photonicsmedia.net/about-autumn). Both the Seasonal Almanac and the Illustrated Almanac have Chinese titles, which are 季節年鑑 (<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/about-seasonal>) and 插圖年鑑 (<http://almanac.photonicsmedia.net/>) respectively.
11. The first almanac project addresses both the Chinese solar terms and Japanese pentads, while the subsequent projects use solar terms and pentads adjusted for the southern hemisphere.
12. The Japanese technique of zuihitsu (or following the brush) developed in tenth-century women's diaristic writings, most notably Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. This way of writing responds to everyday events with contemplation in the form of short prose, or often unconnected fragments.
13. Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1992).
14. Karoline Kirst, 'Walter Benjamin's "Denkbild":

- Emblematic Historiography of the Recent Past', *Monatshefte*, 86/4 (1994), 515.
15. Paul Stephens and Robert Hardwick Weston, 'Free Time: Overworked as Ontological Condition', in *Social Text*, 26/1 (2008), 139.
 16. Anazographesis is discussed in relation to the writings of Posidonius and Chrysippus. 'Emotional impulse' is also described as affective movement, a non-rational response.
 17. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 80.
 18. Esther Leslie, 'Traces of Craft', *Journal of Design History*, 11/1 (1998), 9.
 19. Stephens and Weston, 'Free Time: Overwork as an Ontological Condition', 139.
 20. The inscriptio translates as follows: 'Shuubun' means Autumnal equinox. 'Beetles wall up their burrows' is from the Chinese Almanac and 'Adzuki beans ripen' is from the modern Japanese almanac).
 21. The common name of tanuki in English is Japanese raccoon dog.
 22. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke Uni Press, 2010), 5.
 23. It is interesting to note that after the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami on 11 March 2011, the presentation of this particulate has come to be defined by this event. This highlights the ambiguities and uncertainties of images.
 24. Tiedemann, 80.
 25. Stephens and Weston, 138.
 26. Bryant, 24 – 6.
 27. Ibid.